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Face Time

## How Bowman and Brooke's Roshan Rajkumar works to build diversity – and not just at his firm

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Roshan Rajkumar has been trying to make minority attorneys feel more comfortable in the Twin Cities and bring cohesion to the diverse legal community. His job got harder after the death of George Floyd and the coronavirus pandemic, which moved attorneys into a remote-work setting.

Rajkumar is co-managing partner with Bowman and Brooke and is chairman of the firm's diversity and inclusion committee. He's also a board member for Twin Cities Diversity in Practice, which is a nonprofit association comprised of more than 60 law firms and corporate legal departments that aim to make the legal community more inclusive.

His methods are simple yet effective, he says. It's a boots-on-the-ground mentality that centers around connecting with people individually.

Rajkumar recently spoke with the Business Journal about diversity in the Twin Cities' legal community and what law firms will do with all of their commercial real estate. The conversation has been edited for length and clarity.

**Let's hear your backstory.** I was born in Minnesota, went to Edina Public Schools. My family originally emigrated from Sri Lanka. I became involved in politics around college and everyone I knew in politics was a lawyer. I thought I would go down the route of being politically active and maybe run for office.

**Being chairman of diversity and inclusion for the firm, what does that do? What about your other efforts around diversity?** We're creating mentoring programs for people with disabilities, LGBTQ and minorities. Younger attorneys who fit those [demographics] have someone older who is like a coach. It's not just about people of color; it's about making sure people in general feel like they're part of the community. Also, fortunately or unfortunately, because I'm brown and an equity partner with the firm, I'm on a lot of panels.

**How does the Twin Cities legal community become more inclusive, and how is it measured?** One thing I'm learning is that it takes a village. When I see young attorneys who are a minority and hired around town, I reach out to them. I let them know I'm not trying to steal them, but if they want to meet for coffee or lunch or have any questions, I'm available. If these people don't feel comfortable, they're going to leave unless they meet the love of their life here — and we're not playing matchmaker. Minnesotans generally aren't good at extending their hand



NANCY KUEHN

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deeply. They'll welcome you to town and that's it. Since Covid-19 started, my wife and I have invited attorneys of color to our home. That's what it takes to be inclusive.

**How has your work on inclusion changed since George Floyd?** I'm not gonna lie, it's difficult. The number of attorneys involved in Twin Cities Diversity in Practice is about 9,000, and we're going to advocate by offering pro bono services. We're not going to pay lip services to the current issues and will offer services around affordable housing, helping businesses damaged from the riots, and lobbying for other changes. The Twin Cities legal profession is taking notice, and we hope to see results slowly but surely.

**What else about diversity in the Twin Cities would you like to add?** The era of President Donald Trump has brought a lot to the surface on politics and division. Regarding George Floyd, I don't care if he had a criminal record or was on drugs. People watched the video and said that is not right. It warmed my heart to see how many white people were part of the protests. Regarding the downtown riots where a Black man shot himself, I was surprised the Minneapolis Police Department put out that video. The reaction after that incident was that Black people came out in droves and there weren't a lot of white people there. They said, "We're going to let our anger out." I don't agree with the destruction, but that's what I saw.

**What are your thoughts on downtown Minneapolis right now?** I recently walked down Nicollet Mall. It's not the space I remember. I was surprised how many homeless people and drug users I saw. I'm not saying I felt unsafe, but you definitely take a risk walking down Nicollet Mall right now.

**Will law firms downsize office space after this?** We're already seeing that. Our office typically had about 120 people in our downtown office. Now it's about eight. We thought we'd be around 70% to 80% productivity working from home. It's actually been about 90%. Our firm is considering downsizing our space by subletting some square feet. The problem is, with no lawyers downtown, we don't connect as much. If firms decide to move to the suburbs, everyone will just go home after work, there won't be any happy hours.

**How is the fiscal year looking for Bowman and Brooke?** I think it'll be okay. It's not going to be a year of bonuses, but we're also not firing or laying people off.

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## **Roshan Rajkumar**

Age: 47

Family: Married with one young son

Education: Bachelor's degree, Boston College; master's degree, The Australian National University; Juris Doctor, University of Minnesota

Hobbies: Tennis and sings in the choir at the Basilica of St. Mary's

Boards: Twin Cities Diversity in Practice, Basilica Landmark board of directors

## **Patrick Rehkamp**

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